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ABSTRACT

The language of English-speaking Caribbean immigrant students in the United States is examined, and it is argued that conventional English-as-a-Second-Language classes and curricula do not address the linguistic needs of these students. Background information on the evolution and sociocultural patterns of English-based vernaculars, or Creoles, of the Caribbean population is offered, and the controversy over their status as dialects or languages is discussed, drawing on the relevant research literature. Literature on the teaching of English to English-based Creole speakers is also examined, and a three-dimensional approach is suggested: (1) immersion in standard English in classes with native English-speakers, to acknowledge and foster growth of already-developed receptive skills; (2) teacher training in the real grammatical differences between standard English and Creole, perhaps using ESL approaches of contrastive and error analysis; and (3) teacher training to explain underlying differences in meaning where superficial similarities in lexicon, syntax, and discourse features exist between standard English and Creole. Some of these basic differences are outlined here. Contains 18 references. (MSE)

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ESL OR ESD?

TEACHING ENGLISH TO CARIBBEAN ENGLISH SPEAKERS

PAPER PRESENTED AT

THE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES CONVENTION

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Introduction

In the last two decades, the United States, especially New York City, has witnessed a significant increase in the number of immigrants from the officially English-speaking Caribbean. With this new influx, public schools and colleges are being challenged to educate students whose Englishes seem markedly different from what school authorities have traditionally defined as "English." Not surprisingly, a large number of these students have been assigned to ESL classes. This paper examines the language of Anglophone Caribbean students and argues that traditional ESL classes do not address the linguistic needs of such students. Students from the English-speaking Caribbean are better served in mainstream classes with teachers who are appropriately trained.

Background

Although English is the official language in the Anglophone Caribbean, the mass vernacular is some variety of English-based Creole. Creole languages emerged from a unique language contact situation which was a direct result of European colonial expansion in the Caribbean between 1500 and 1900 (Bickerton, 1981).The plantation systems established during this period were mostly engaged in monoculture, usually sugar -- a crop that demanded a large, sustained labor force. This need resulted in the importation of a large mass of mainly non-European laborers drawn from different language groups who were forced to co-exist with a ruling European minority in rigidly stratified societies. The labor force consisted of

mostly slaves from West Africa, later supplemented by indentured laborers from India, China and Portugal. It is generally assumed that these various language groups evolved some form of an auxiliary contact language, native to none of them, known as a "pidgin," and that this language, suitably expanded, became the native or "creole" language of the Caribbean communities that exist today. Creoles are in most cases different enough from the original contact situation to be considered "new" languages. Their syntax, morphology and phonology are more akin to some West African languages, while their lexicons are mainly drawn from the dominant European language. In the case of the Anglophone Caribbean, Creoles bear a superficial resemblance to English because of their English-dominant lexicon -- hence the term "English-based Creoles." It is this quasi-relation to English, however, that has placed Creoles in an anomalous position, often giving them pejorative names such as "bad" or "broken English."

The Creole Continuum

To be sure, Creoles in the Anglophone Caribbean have not enjoyed autonomy as languages in their right (Winford, 1994). The history of slavery and British colonization in the Caribbean forced the continued interaction of standard English and Creoles in a lopsided arrangement that privileged the standard variety and stigmatized Creoles. The interaction of the two language varieties has created what DeCamp (1971) calls a *creole continuum*, later termed a *post-creole continuum* by Mervyn Alleyne (1985) and other linguists. The basic premise of the continuum is

that there is no sharp cleavage between the Creole and the standard. Rather, there is a continuous spectrum of speech varieties ranging from the *basilect* (most conservative creole) to the *mesolect* (mid-range, less creolized varieties) to the *acrolect* (the standard variety, with some local phonological and lexical features). Generally speaking, there is a correlation between high social status and acrolectal speech, and conversely, low social status and basilectal speech. However, this is not an absolute phenomenon. Winford (1994) notes that socioeconomic status alone does not account for language use. Education, ethnicity, and rural/urban provenance are all factors that affect one's speech. There is also a fair amount of style shifting along the continuum as the need arises to adjust to social context. Basilectal to mesolectal varieties are preferred for informal situations while acrolectal speech is generally reserved for school, church, business and other formal domains. From time to time, there is some overlap. Still, the majority of Anglophone Caribbean people actually speak basilectal to mesolectal varieties of Creole but continue to label their language as "English", for Creole is associated with low racial, social, political and economic status (Winer, 1993). Caribbean people live and eventually migrate with this dual linguistic identity.

Caribbean Migration

The significant increase in immigration from the Anglophone Caribbean to the United States began with the passage of the United States Immigration Act of 1965 which abandoned the national origins quota system favoring Northern and Western

Europeans (Foner, 1987). Natives of the officially English-speaking Caribbean, who had been subject to very small quotas, were now included in the 120,000 ceiling for the Western Hemisphere (South and North America and the Caribbean). A noteworthy feature of the 1965 Act was that it gave preference to professional and skilled workers (Bonnett, 1981). Thus, in the post-1965 years up until the late 1970s, the United States attracted Caribbean immigrants who were generally middle class, better educated and skilled. As the 1980s approached, conditions worsened in the Caribbean. Economic difficulties, political instability and a general social demise forced unprecedented numbers of people to flee their countries. Migration continued to increase, this time dominated by large sections of the underclass who were predominantly basilectal Creole speakers with minimum proficiency in standard English. New York City has been the primary destination of these new immigrants, Jamaicans and Guyanese being foremost among them. Rivera-Batiz (1994) citing statistics from the Immigration and Naturalization Service shows that between 1982 and 1991 some 87,112 Jamaicans legally migrated to New York City followed by 67,729 Guyanese. For the same period, 10,000 and 7,000 Jamaicans and Guyanese respectively enrolled in the city's public schools.

The language and academic preparation of these newly-arrived immigrant students were unlike those of their predecessors. While earlier Caribbean immigrants were more uniform in their academic preparation and demonstrated

greater proficiency in standard English, newly-arrived immigrants showed a kind of schism in academic preparation. Some were moderately prepared, but many were poorly schooled, reflecting the disparity among educational institutions in the Caribbean. Furthermore, their predominantly basilectal speech called their "English speaking" classification into question. For the first time, American educators were forced to decide whether Caribbean English-based Creoles constitute separate languages or can still be considered dialects of English.

Creoles - Languages or Dialects?

Whether Creoles are languages in their own right or merely dialects of English is an unresolved question. The fact is that Caribbean English-based Creoles are in an anomalous position where they are in constant interaction with a prestige variety of standard English; hence their structural integrity as languages is continually challenged. Alleyne (1987) notes that such Creoles are not well defined linguistic systems and therefore defy clearcut definitions as either languages or dialects. He resolves the issue by returning to the Creole continuum. If pressed, however, most linguists tend to favor the view of Creoles as languages in their own right. Studies have shown that wherever Creoles are viewed as autonomous languages, they enjoy high prestige (Alleyne, 1980; Winford, 1994) and conversely, where viewed as dialects, they are stigmatized. In other words, when Creoles are juxtaposed and interact with a European-derived standard language viewed as the ideal norm in the same socio-economic environment, as is the case with most Creoles outside of

isolated rural communities, they come to be viewed as deformed versions of the standard and are negatively evaluated.

Creoles have also been viewed as interlanguages. Thompson (1984) states that Schumann compared Creoles to fossilized interlanguages. Thompson argues, however, that "the comparison is relevant and illuminating, but can only be partially applied. Whereas the interlanguage of the foreign language learner is a linguistic system used in addition to his native language, Creole is a native language which is adequate for everyday social needs" (p.173). It has crystallized into a full-fledged, rule-governed system, and the Creole-speaking learner has the ability to operate at several levels on the speech continuum. It is only when s/he becomes involved in a formal learning situation that any deficiency becomes apparent. Such is the case in New York City schools where Creoles, like African-American Vernacular English, are judged against standard English, and inevitably, Creole speakers come to be stigmatized. Many administrators and teachers are unfamiliar with the sound and features of Caribbean Creoles, and this often results in misplacement and misguided assessment practices. Anglophone Caribbean students, for whom "English is neither a native language nor a foreign language" (Craig, 1971), are particularly vulnerable to linguistic misclassification.

In a study of Jamaican Creole-speaking students in New York City public schools, Pratt-Johnson (1993) notes that these students are faced with one of three possibilities on entering school: a) if their language seems decidedly creolized, they

are assigned to ESL classes; b) because they are labeled officially English-speaking, they are placed into regular classes with teachers who are not appropriately trained to address their unique linguistic needs; c) they are assigned to special education classes. Whichever option is chosen, Caribbean students find themselves in an unfavorable position since their linguistic needs are mishandled or go unchecked.

In another study of newly-arrived Caribbean students in New York City public schools, Narvaez and Garcia (1992) note that defining the language of these students is a challenge for New York City school officials. The language of new Caribbean immigrants ranges from a basilectal Creole to standard Caribbean English. Many teachers cannot understand basilectal speakers and this often leads to their placement in ESL classes. At the same time, students who speak basilectal to mesolectal Creole as their only language and are under the mistaken belief that they speak standard Caribbean English are baffled and frustrated when they are assigned to ESL classes. Narvaez and Garcia point out the inappropriateness of ESL classes for Caribbean English-based Creole speakers. Because of the constant interaction of Creole and English along the continuum, Creole speakers' receptive knowledge of standard English far exceeds that of "true" non-native speakers of English; hence traditional ESL classes do not address their linguistic needs. Furthermore, because Caribbean Creole-speaking students perceive themselves as speaking English, they may have very little motivation to learn English under the conditions of traditional ESL classes. Since English is not (strictly speaking) a

second language for most Anglophone Caribbean students, the question then becomes: how might educators best address their linguistic needs?

Approaches to teaching English to English-based Creole speakers

In a study of the language of Caribbean students, Dalphinis (1985) points out that the most forceful argument against an ESL approach is that Caribbean students speak a dialect of English and as such have no need for ESL. It is argued that Caribbean students simply need intensive immersion in standard English. However, intensive immersion in standard English without recognition of real differences between standard English and Creole might encourage gross misconceptions in language learning. Winer (1993) cautions that "[s]uperficial similarities between English Creole and English hide real and fundamental differences in language" (p.193). This would suggest, then, that a multifaceted approach is needed to address the linguistic needs of English-based Creole speakers. The following three-dimensional approach is suggested:

1) Anglophone Caribbean students should be immersed in standard English in classes with native speakers of English. Such an environment would recognize their already developed receptive skills in English and foster growth in this area. It would also rapidly enhance their productive skills in the standard.
2) Teachers should be trained to point out the real differences in grammar between standard English and Creole. Some ESL approaches might be useful here, such as contrastive analysis and error analysis.

3) Where superficial similarities in lexicon, syntax and discourse features between standard English and Creole exist, teachers must be trained to explain the underlying differences in meaning.

Basic differences between Creole and standard English grammar

1) Creole verbs show tense by context, not by standard English inflection:
e.g. My mother come here yesterday (yesterday signals the past tense).

2) There is no inflection for subject/verb agreement:
e.g. He go to work by train.

3) There is no separate passive form in Creole:
e.g The food serve quick = The food was served quickly.

4) There is no inflection for plurals after number words:
e.g I have two cat. (The implication here is that two already signals plurality)

5) Possession is shown by the juxtaposition of possessor and possessed, not by the standard English genitive marker 's:
e.g. This is John hat.

6) Various of functions of the verb to be. Holm (1985) notes that many African and Creole languages have distinct words for be depending on whether the predicate is a noun, adjective, prepositional phrase of location and so forth.

e.g In Jamaican Creole, when a noun follows, an equative copula is required:
He is a carpenter = /Im is kaapinta/

The Jamaican student, then, is unlikely to omit the verb be in standard English if the predicate is a noun. On the other hand, adjectives in Creole are subcategories of verbs and require no form of be:
e.g. He is alright = /Im aarait/

Holm notes that the rule may be transferred to standard English as in the following sentence in which adjectives and similar constructions are treated as verbs:
i) It don't worth nothing.
ii) They should allowed to go.

The zero form of be can also appear before locative phrases and in forming the progressive tense:
e.g. They actually killing the cow. (Holm, 1985)

Other features of Caribbean student writing (non-Creole features)

1) Use of British spellings: colour, theatre, dreamt
Equivalent American spellings: color, theater, dreamed

2) A tendency to use longer sentences and a more formal writing style (typically British) as opposed to the more direct, succinct style of American English.

Semantic differences

There are many words which are standard English in form but carry a different meaning for the Creole speaker. Roberts (1988) points out that although standard English verbs such as *go, does, done, been, did, had* are the same form in Creole, there are structural and semantic differences between the way these verbs are used in Creole and the way they are used in standard English. For example, *does* in standard English is vocally stressed, is third person singular, is emphatic, and used in response to a contrary meaning or used with a negative (not), whereas in Creole, *does* is unstressed, is used for any person/number, and denotes habitual action. Winer (1993) notes that many "false friends" exist between English and Creole; for example, *miserable* in Trinidadian Creole means "badly behaved", *fresh* can mean "smelling slightly gamy, rotten", *foot* means "the part of the body from the toes to the hips" (p.194). It is important to point out to Creole speakers as they are learning standard English the differences between the Creole and standard English meaning of words that are standard English in form. Winer adds that the superficial

similarities between English and Creole yield positive results for Creole speakers learning standard English in the beginning. But she warns that "the English Creole speaker will reach crucial humps or plateaus at particular points and often be more frustrated and resentful than a typical ESL student" (p.194). It is at these moments that language teachers must demonstrate the most patience and sensitivity towards the unique linguistic situation of the Creole speaker. Beyond the linguistic aspect, London (1980) suggests that American educators in planning for and interacting with Caribbean students will require among other support systems "a sense of Caribbean history and a sensitivity towards the backgrounds of students, their values and culture patterns, their environment and the specific influences which impinge upon them" (p.11). He asserts that they will also need to develop a "sensitivity towards non-American phenomena; that speech patterns may not necessarily be incorrect, but different; that British oriented spelling and writing style, for example, will in time be gradually adapted to the American mode" (p.12).

Conclusion

This paper has described the unique linguistic situation of Anglophone Caribbean students in American schools. These students, who actually speak varieties of English-based Creoles but label their language as English, defy American educators' traditional notions of English and often end up being (mis)placed into ESL classes. It has been argued that ESL classes are inappropriate for English-based Creole speakers, for their receptive (and often

productive) skills in English surpass those of legitimate second language learners. It is suggested that Caribbean English-based Creole speakers be immersed in English classes with native speakers of English and be taught by teachers who are appropriately trained. Teachers should be cognizant of the syntactic, semantic and discourse features of Caribbean English-based Creoles as well as the differences and superficial similarities that exist between Creoles and English. Finally, teachers of Caribbean students should develop a sensitivity towards Caribbean history and culture.

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